California Mountain Drivers.

THE California ranchmen have wonderful aptitude for driving, and one sees some pretty good examples among the hills. The road down the mountain sides is entirely unguarded on the outer edge, and the descent in most places is precipitous. A balky horse, or a fractured wheel, or a slight carelessness in handling the reins, might easily send a carriage-load of people to destruction—and an awful destruction, too. The path is wide enough for one pair of wheels only, but at intervals it broadens so that teams may pass each other. The huge lumber teams which carry wood from the mills in the mountains to the yards in the valleys are especially hard to manage. Yet the drivers always seem easy and nonchalant. First there is a large four-wheeled oaken truck with a seat in front ten feet above the ground; behind it is another truck, somewhat shorter, but still enormously stout. These are fastened together and loaded with from ten to fifteen tons of freshly-sawn lumber—boards and joists. This mass is drawn by six or eight mules or horses, guided by reins and a prodigiously long whip. The first wagon has a powerful brake, worked by a long iron lever by the driver upon his seat. The driver is a man of nerve and courage. It will not do for him to take fright, even if in imminent danger, and he must know to a hair's breadth where he can go and where he cannot.

But a beholder—ignorant of the danger that constantly surrounds him—would say that his work was simple, and that he managed matters with ease. True, it seems so. With his sinewy hands holding the reins with carelessness, his legs outstretched, one foot feeling the all-important brake, he jogs onward with his monster charge without trouble or concern; the bells upon the horses' breasts jingle a little tune; the great wheels crush the stones in the path; the load creaks like a ship's hull in a sudden gust; wild birds sweep down into hazy, sunny depths below; yet the driver seems to take no heed. But let a "scare" take place: let a herd of runaway cattle appear at a bend and set the horses wild, and then see what will happen. The day dreamer will become a giant of strength; he is up in a flash; he shortens his hold upon the reins, and feeling his wagon start up beneath him, plants a foot of iron on the brake. The horses snort and rear and surge; the harnesses rattle, the dust arises, the load shrieks again, and the huge wheels turn fatally faster and faster. An instant may hurl the wagon down into the valley with its struggling train—a mad rush to the other side of the way may end all in one horrible plunge. Muscle, eye, brain, skill are then brought to work so splendidly together that the peril is averted, and the looker-on, who knows not the key of the land, regards the teamster with profound respect thereafter.—*San Francisco Argus.*

The Chinese as Soldiers.

OF considerable strength numerically, the Chinese army has at present but little fighting value. The Chinese soldier is naturally brave, and the men recruited in the northern districts of the Empire are full of vigor and energy; but the troops are practically totally uninstructed in military duties. That this should be the case is probably mainly owing to the inferiority of the Chinese officers. "They are," says a French writer, "below all criticism;" and that they are so must be ascribed to the low esteem in which the profession of arms is held in China. "You would not," runs a Chinese saying, "take good iron to make into nails, and you would not take a man worth anything at all to make into a soldier." A man need not be in any way educated to obtain a commission; but, on the other hand, he must be an athlete. Carrying and throwing heavy weights, the use of the sword and shooting with the bow, both on foot and on horseback, are the subjects in which a man desirous of obtaining a commission is examined. Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that the Chinese officer is as a rule utterly ignorant of military art; while his men, knowing that he is as ignorant as themselves, have but little respect for him.

AGRICULTURE is to be made an obligatory study in all elementary schools of France. This is a recent action of the French Senate, and was adopted by a majority of 254 votes.

The Alligator.

VARIOUS men have written various things regarding the alligator, but we are not bound to believe any of them. He is classed as a reptile, but we can put him in any other class we think best, this being a free country. He is at the present time the largest of his species, and in the enjoyment of perfect health. His relatives, as far as heard from, are also well, thank you.

For hundreds of years the wise men of the world vainly tried to find out what alligators were made for. Some supposed they were a parlor ornament on legs; others contended that their mission was to tow sawlogs up and down; and many persons firmly believed that the reptile had no other aim in life than to get hold of the juicy heel of a runaway darkey.

We shall divide the alligator into several sections, in order to study his different points. The head comes first. It is one part head and two parts mouth, this chap being the only living thing that can open his mouth as far as he wants to, and then have lots of spare mouth left. The jaws are built on the sawmill principle. While one is working, the other is resting and getting ready for a soft snap. No one ever experimented to see just how strong an alligator was in his jaws, but when they have been seen to crunch the end off a saw-log, and bend a crow-bar double, you may take it for granted that a small boy's shoulder-blades wouldn't stop their teeth very long. Their teeth are numerous, and made on honor. They not only use them to pick up tender infants lost overboard, but to haul prosy old spotted cows off the river bank and put them beyond further pain and sorrow. When an alligator gets a fair hold of you there is only one thing to do—call for the police.

In the head are the eyes. They could not grow in a better place to please the reptile. They are so set that he can see before and behind him, and there is no danger of their getting blacked in a free fight. If the eyes took up more room there would n't be so much mouth; therefore, the eyes are no larger than those of a dog.

The legs of an alligator are short and stout, it not being supposed that he would ever participate in a walking match. He uses them with equal facility on land or water, and but very few cork-legs have ever been seen in use among them. It might have been just as well had these reptiles been built on the principle of the camel or the giraffe, but we must not complain of Nature's ways.

The body and tail are covered with an extra roof to protect the alligator from hailstones and brick-bats, and it's no use to shoot beans at him from the top of a high bank. It has been asserted that a bullet cannot penetrate this thick skin, but if you ever get sight of one of the gentry pop your bullets at him from any point of the compass. If they don't kill him they will certainly cause sorrowful thoughts, and perhaps lead to a resolution to reform. The tail is firmly fastened to the body, and is both ornamental and useful. The day may not be far distant when we shall walk down to the placid waters at evening-time to gaze on a race of bob-tailed alligators, but just at present they have lots of use for these pieces of personal property. It is said that they can knock a man end over end with one sweep of the tail, but they are seldom mean enough to do it.

Alligators eat most everything which comes in their way and make no complaints. No landlady would have the least trouble with them. They like each other's society, but prefer to put in any spare time they have in the company of such men as they can lay hold of. Their habits are very regular; their conduct all that can be expected, and they stick to business till the pond dries up. As a general rule if you are up a tree and the alligator is in a pond he is not inclined to meddle with your affairs, but you can rouse his curiosity and his belligerent disposition very quickly by dropping down and trying to use him as a ferry boat. He, no doubt gets along just as well as if he had been a clam or an oyster, and don't you put faith in any historian who tries to make you believe that the reptile sighs for any change beyond that of diet.—*Detroit Free Press.*

A PROMISE is a just debt, which you must take care to pay, for honor and honesty are the best security.

The Mysterious Stranger at Laramie.

MY attention has very recently been called to a stranger who seems to be a feature of the great mountain exodus. He wears a Mexican sombrero, broad at the base and shallow of crown, with "strange, wild fancies," as Colonel Downey would say, worked in scarlet and gold upon it, and a gold cord with cardinal tassels of great size. His coat is a long buckskin garment, cut plain like a night shirt, with beads worked all over it, and buckskin strings attached to it along the seams and around the tail. He has other odd, wild toggery about him, and seems to feel disappointed because he hasn't killed anybody for an hour or two.

When the passenger train from the East comes in he stands at the depot with a far-away look, like one whose thoughts are roaming among the ranks of grass-grown graves in his own private cemetery, where he plants those who do not love him.

The passengers look at him with solemn awe and respect and do not speak to him, because they are afraid they will disturb him and make him irritated, and he will put a six-flush on the train and mix up a ghastly array of mutilated corpses.

No one seemed to know who this man was at first. Some said it was the left-wing of the James boys. Others, still, said that it was a cut-throat known as "The Howling Demon of Pappoose Canon." The old frontiersman said that it was "The Wild-Eyed Man Flattener from Stinking Water." Others said they recognized him as "The Sanguinary Gizzard-Eater of Yuba Dam."

But he was none of these noted characters.

The citizens called a convention and decided that they would draw lots to see who should hold an interview with him and find out if there was any way by which we could alleviate his woe and ease the canker which was eating away his heartstrings. It was decided that the people of Wyoming should let him have a man to kill, if that was the secret of his consuming grief, and, rather than see him pining his young life away, a victim would be provided for him each week at least.

The bloody task of interviewing this wholesale and retail dealer in funerals and headquarters for cemetery and medical college supplies fell on me.

I bade adieu to my family, rehearsed a part of "The Immortals" to work in a dying speech, wrote to Washington, sending in my resignation as United States Commissioner, and, having put on my new clothes, I went to this man, who carries with him a death record of those who have died at his hands, which looks like the advertised letter list of the Leadville Post-office.

I wondered afterward how I came to fly into the very jaws of death as I did, but I kept my piercing eye on the grave-yard monopolist till he quailed. I straightened up to my full height and taking a step ladder I went up and threw back my aurora borealis locks from the wide honest brow. If there is any feature I possess which excites my pardonable pride, it is my square open brow. If I had as much money, as I have brow, I would ride around the country on a special train, but I haven't. Year after year I am keeping over a larger and larger stock of shop-worn brow for which there is no demand.

I came away from the interview with this man greatly relieved. He was not carniverous as we had supposed. He was not grieving for a chance to bathe himself in gore. He was introducing a new kind of grease-spot eradicator, and he was suffering a good deal of mental anguish because he couldn't bring his sales up to fifty cents per day.—"*Wyoming Kit,*" *in Denver Tribune.*

A Boy's Meditation on the Death of a Playmate.

I HEARD that Sanford H. was sick; next that he was very sick; then that he was dead! When the boy is well and out every day playing with you; flying kites, making dirt-pies, bragging about his father and telling those shadowy, puffy legends about things he knows nothing of—something like older people, as, for instance, that the star at the comet's head is to fall week after next and set the earth on fire, and you go home terribly frightened and at last muster up sufficient courage to ask the opinion of your parents in reference to the matter, and they restore your confidence in the eternal stability of things by pooh-poohing at such nonsense, albeit your mother an hour ago was also alarmed at reading in the paper the eternal and seven-yearly recurring prediction of the gloomy German astronomer that the earth is circling like a moth round and round, nearer and nearer to the sun, and is eventually to fall into it and be shriveled up like a bit of tissue paper, while your father, as he absently swallows his tea, is internally cogitating over the possibility foreshadowed by a French savan that the earth is gradually receding from the sun, and in the course of 500,000 centuries will be cooled to a globe of ice. While all this is going on, and the boy is merely your barefooted, every-day playfellow, he seems near, familiar and compassable in your thoughts. But sickness comes; the boy disappears. You hear talk of lung or scarlet fever. You see his father on the street with a grave, anxious look. You behold the vehicle which so often seems to precede the hearse, the doctor's carriage, standing at the door. For days the boy's case is the subject for breakfast and supper gossip. At night you pass the house; there is that light in the upper windows. You know he is there, struggling with something dreadful; and so many are thinking of him—nurses, friends, relatives, the doctor. So much is being done for him; yet he grows worse and worse. It is through all this that the boy, as you think of him, becomes something very different from the every-day boy with whom you have played; something sad, solemn, mysterious—something you may not explain, but only feel. The cloud hangs over everything; over the house where he lies; over his empty seat in the school-room; over the very marbles you won from him.

They tell you he is dead! The cloud deepens and blackens. It is now the more terrible for you to think in unspoken words that these grown-up men and women, these people who have to you seemed so powerful, who speak with so much confidence and authority, who, had they deemed you of sufficient importance to come and tell you that Sanford H. would get well, you would have held as oracles infallible. It is dreadful for you to begin to realize how powerless they are to avert death! Such were my feelings throughout the sickness and at the death of Sanford H. The infant school to which I belonged must attend his funeral in a body. I was dressed for the occasion. There was no pleasure in being so arrayed. I would rather have strayed in the woods by myself than have attended that funeral. There, I should have thought a great deal of the dead boy. They would have been sad, but not gloomy thoughts. The funeral was dreadfully solemn, of course, with the rustling and shuffling of people as they came in; the long, silent pause before the service commenced; the coffin on the parlor table; the smell of varnish; and above all, the awful—yes, I must say it—the awful voice of the minister as he delivered the funeral discourse—a discourse which for days after made the sunshine black and all life a dreary passage through an endless graveyard. Then we were told to take our last look. It was the first corpse I had ever seen. So white! And all this to go on about him and he so indifferent and motionless, save those lifeless tremblings as the people crowded and pressed about the coffin. All the wonder, and dread, and mystery, and speculation of grown-up men and women about death are also felt by the child. Only it fears and feels and is silent. Some boys a little older than we acted as pall-bearers. They bore the coffin on a bier to the family vault. It seemed to me a dreadful responsibility. They carried it down the steps and disappeared at the black entrance. When they came out the bier was empty. All that metal ornamentation, the embroidered shroud and satin pillows and flowers to be left there! Our infant school was marshaled in line and we were led away. But my thought long remained behind with that white and silent boy, lying in his coffin in that dark, damp place. I could hear there the dripping of the water drops seeping through the roof, the rustling of foul living things as they moved about the charnel house, and still through winter and summer as the grass growing green then withering, the snows whitening the ground and melting away again, the flowers coming and the birds singing, still in the dark, silent vault below I staid with the white, motionless mystery which once talked and smiled on me.—*Prentice Mulford.*